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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a market driven model for assessing the service quality of support services in higher education, primarily for United States institutions, by examining higher education within the context of a complex service industry. The paper begins by explaining the development of the model and its implications for service management. Next, a description is given of higher education as a service industry. An illustration is provided of the combination of the institution's internal market offering (degrees and courses offered) and related activities within a framework of the external factors (social, cultural, legal, political, economic, and technological) that affect the institutional choice of prospective students (and their parents). The support services that a college or university offers and their perceived quality by the customer (student) are examined in terms of the services' ability to satisfy student needs and perceptions. The managerial implications for the design of support services are discussed, as well as the implications involved in attempting to measure service quality. Ten determinants are listed for measuring service quality (path analysis), and their use is explained. The determinants are based upon student expectations of service quality rather than on historic goals or operating policies of the unit. Contains 31 references. (GLR)

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THE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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This paper will present a market driven model for assessing the service quality of support services in higher education, primarily for United States institutions. Contrary to other work on quality assessment in higher education, this model exists within a customer driven, competitive, and capitalistic market system. Earlier work (Astin, 1982) described five traditional approaches to the assessment of quality in American higher education: the nihilist, the reputational, the resource measures, the outcomes measures, and the value-added approaches. These approaches do not recognize that student and parental choices are dominant forces with institutional selection decisions and many other choices made during matriculation. Other significant work (Ewell, 1988 and Banta, 1986) focused on change strategies and the funding implications of various assessment programs within the dynamics of American higher education.

Additional work by others (Moodie, 1988; Caruthers and Marks, 1988; Hinchberger, 1990; Leslie and Conrad, 1985-86; and Bassis and Guskin, 1986) likewise articulates value-added, "fitness for use", funding levels, the declination of standards; a resource approach via state allocations; and research and scholarship as measures of quality in American higher education. In similar fashion, a report on Canadian higher education advocates a student development approach (Gilbert and Evers, 1989); a report on higher education in Africa uses descriptive data on instructional materials and class size to comment on poor quality (Moock and Jamison,

1988); and a report on Dutch higher education defines quality in terms of goals and resource input factors (De Weert, 1990).

The cited research studies vary significantly in their approaches to defining and measuring quality. The use of these studies in evaluating student support services becomes questionable when higher education is viewed as a complex service industry. As a service industry, most institutions in higher education are dependent upon customer decisions for a significant portion of their revenue and the attraction of new customers (students) from word-of-mouth referrals, a classic marketing activity.

Evaluation in United States higher education has been primarily accomplished through accrediting agencies. This educational accreditation has historically concentrated on technical quality, for example, faculty degrees, number of library holdings, volume of research funds, and so forth. Accreditors have asked for information concerning the quality of student outcomes or the effectiveness of academic programs. In so doing, the assessment of institutional support services quality has been ignored. A different model is needed to examine the student's life as a customer in the higher education marketplace. The congruence between many service industries in the business sector and higher education suggests the applicability of the research for the assessment of service quality to higher education.

International business is currently focused on customer satisfaction. Hundreds of companies (perhaps thousands) measure customer satisfaction and try to integrate the findings into product and service market offerings, as well as their overall corporate strategy (Schlossberg, 1991). This international attention on customer satisfaction has led to a "growing consensus that customers evaluate service quality by comparing their service quality expectations with their perceptions of the service quality they

have experienced. Customer satisfaction is thought to occur when perceived service quality meets (or exceeds) service quality expectations" (Brogowicz, Delene, and Lyth, 1990, 34). In other words, quality is defined by the expectations of customers.

The findings from a recent research study on hospital patient satisfaction (Press and Garvey, 1991) involving 73,000 patients from 124 hospitals support our hypotheses. Somewhat surprisingly, interpersonal issues, and not technical skills, were among the most important issues to patients. The researchers found: (1) All medical personnel have some type of interaction with patients; (2) Patients make judgements about their care based on how they are treated; (3) How patients perceive care affects their trust in care-givers; (4) Patients' beliefs that their medical care is "good" may contribute as much as one-third to the actual healing process; and (5) Patient attitudes toward their care affect their stress level, and the lower the stress level, the fewer painkillers used. Generalized hypotheses for higher education would be: (1) All college personnel have some type of interaction with students; (2) Students make judgements about their education based on how they are treated; (3) How students perceive education depends upon their trust in faculty and staff; (4) Students' beliefs that their education is "good" may contribute as much as one-third to their educational process; and (5) Student attitudes towards their education may be related to their stress levels, and the lower the stress level, the less substance abuse present on campus. We believe the assessment of student satisfaction from established service quality business research will support these or similar findings in higher education.

A student satisfaction model of service quality research has many implications. The most fundamental implication is to perceive and treat students as customers,

which is already occurring in numerous for profit and non-profit organizations. Fluctuations in the quality of applicants could be tied to perceptions of the quality of the institution, a variable already encountered by others (James et al., 1989). Clusters of freshmen from certain high schools could be explained more accurately. Further, transfer rates in and out of institutions could be partially explained.

The remainder of this paper is focused on developing a market driven model for the assessment of service quality in higher education and its implications for service management. The model will be applicable to diverse university service offerings, for example, financial aid, residence halls, dining services, and records and registration offices.

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A SERVICE INDUSTRY

The market offering of service industries is characterized by three primary attributes: the intangible nature of the core offering (product or service); the simultaneous nature of service production and service consumption; and the customer's participation in the production and delivery of the service. The U. S. Department of Commerce has classified repair, personal care, amusement and recreation, health, legal, and educational services as service industries -- each of which has market offerings characterized by these primary attributes. While the core offering may be intangible, it is often manifested by tangible evidence such as written policies, tickets, prescriptions, documents, diplomas, and transcripts. The simultaneity of production and consumption is a central characteristic of education where, for example, the lecture is "produced" by the professor as it is simultaneously "consumed" by the student.

The core market offerings (products and services) of higher education consist of degrees and courses of study at different prices and locations from a variety of institutions. These market offerings of educational services are presented to prospective buyers through a mix of promotional materials including direct mail and telephone solicitations, trial demonstrations through campus visits, discounted prices from financial aid and scholarship offers, and various institutional support services. Some services that surround the core service offering (primarily in the United States) may include employment and placement assistance, housing, health services, and recreational facilities. The core market offering of specific degrees and courses of study, their price and representation through promotional activities, and place or location of education and support services constitute the internal or controllable environment for each college or university. Prospective buyers (students) sort through various market offerings and make their institutional choice -- partly based on the internal, institutionally determined offerings and related support services -- and partly based on buyer specific external variables that also impact their decision.

The external variables that affect the student's institutional choice include social, cultural, legal, political, economic and technological factors over which colleges and universities have little or no control. The social factor of selecting a university attended by high school friends is one a college can do little about -- except to recognize and support such informal reference networks. In similar fashion, the cultural value of specific religious affiliation makes some colleges more attractive to certain prospective students than other educational institutions. Federal and state statutes may limit the portability of financial aid and thus impact the choice of college or university. Admission criteria based on parental demographics constitute political

constraints as do institutional restrictions of choice of students wishing to study certain fields at particular universities. These factors (and others) from the external uncontrollable environment may serve as an accelerator or brake on individual choice in selecting a college or university. In other cases, such external factors may restrict the market offerings and institutional services a university can make available, for example, by enrollment limits on specific programs or institutions.

The combination of the institution's determined internal market offering and related activities, within a framework of the external factors that also affect the institutional choice of prospective students (and their parents) is illustrated below.

INSERT FIGURE ONE

This graphic representation is equivalent to the traditional marketing mix of product (or service), place, price and promotion of for-profit business organizations and the similar external environments they consider when determining market offerings. The centrality of the customer (in education, the student) is reinforced in market-oriented companies by the continuous research and measurement of customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is a function of expectations, which are a result of prior experience or word-of-mouth and other representational communication. Individual students' expectations are modified by actual institutional experience. Their modified expectations form a belief construct about institutional quality which is subsequently communicated to others. This market driven view of education as a major service industry establishes the basis for the assessment and measurement of service quality.

BLUEPRINTING THE COMPONENTS OF QUALITY

Once service quality is recognized as an important competitive advantage, colleges and universities have two choices about student expectations and their

subsequent institutional experiences. Institutions may either shift the expectations of prospective buyers by altering promotional activities or shift the service culture and operations to match student (customer) expectations. Either choice is expensive and long-term but the findings from business indicate greater customer satisfaction and customer retention when expectations and experiences match quite closely. Further, the measurement of service quality can be at the overall or global level for the college or university or a measurement of individual unit service quality. The relationships among unit ratings and a student's satisfaction with core market offerings are expected to be powerful.

The key to developing and improving service quality to students is to gain knowledge of service quality ratings and of the relationships among those ratings of the service units to each other and to the institutional, global quality rating. As noted previously, the student develops expectations about service quality based on a wide variety of influences, some of which are institutional value statements reflected in promotional activities while others are experiential and derived from word-of-mouth sources. Each unit that delivers a service impacts the overall quality assessment the individual has of the university or college. The key to improving the global rating of institutional service quality is knowing how students rate the quality of service and the extent and how each service unit influences the global rating.

The blueprint for the influence of each unit's quality measures takes into account the interrelationships among the various units and the possible disproportionate influence of any one service unit. The global service quality rating will be affected if the student has a negative service experience [often called a "moment-of-truth" in services marketing, (Gronroos, 1990)] which is not resolved properly.

Consequently, no a priori path model of influences on the units can yet be put into place. At the outset, we only know that each service unit's quality should be positively rather than negatively related to global quality.

The path model for the influences of each unit must be developed as the expectations for each service unit are determined. Additionally, the path model for quality ratings of any two institutions may be different, reflecting their institutional characteristics and values. This is apparent when the centrality of a given service in student expectations yields higher path coefficients for certain colleges and universities. For example, a college that is primarily residential will have a different basis for assessing service quality than a community college that primarily serves city residents. An institution that represents itself as a small, intimate campus will have different path coefficients from one that represents and markets itself as a major research university.

Figure 2 presents routine services, which are provided to students at some universities. Some services represent high involvement with the student, for example, major academic programs of study, while others represent low involvement, such as routine merchandising services.

INSERT FIGURE 2

The relationship among the services as the student sees it is an empirical issue and key to any institution's definition of service quality. Some service measures may be highly intercorrelated or perhaps causitively related because of simple proximity to the core service offering, for example, freshman advising versus advising in the major academic department. Other unit quality measures may be highly related to the global quality measure because of the centrality of the service for the students, for example, course

registration. However, institutional values and marketing strategies do influence the expectations of students about relationships among service offices. This is a prime area for concentrated assessment research in higher education.

Each item in Figure 2 is linked with the outside rim path to the other items and is a two-way path of influence on expectations and continuing institutional experience. Additionally, each individual service unit, represented by the spokes of the wheel, is linked to the global service quality rating of the institution. The weight of the path between a service unit and the global rating may be either positive or negative depending upon the student's continued service experience and subsequently modified expectations. These "discovered" positive and negative relationships between service units and their impact on the overall institutional quality rating has implications for the design of support services in colleges and universities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN OF SUPPORT SERVICES

The managerial implications for the design of student support services are straightforward and several. First, the role and functions of support services represented by the institution and in promotional materials must match the unit's capacity for service delivery. A photograph of a placement office full of students, recruiters in offices, and plenty of clerical assistance should match the reality of the service at a given university. The accurate representation of service scope avoids the phenomenon of "empty promises marketing" which later affects satisfaction with the institution. The student's expectation of "full service" placement assistance must include full service delivery. This is particularly important for the functional quality or process aspects of service delivery (Chase and Bowen, 1988).

The second managerial implication for the design of support services is the shift from a focus on structure to a focus on process. If the focus remains on structure (who is supposed to do what), then the institution's flexibility and management of the service encounter with students will suffer. For example, students with unresolved credit transfer problems, should have all issues resolved by the initial contact person--regardless of whether that contact person is a member of the faculty, the records office staff, or admissions personnel. While customization of service to students may not be desirable, it is possible to individualize student contacts if employees are rewarded and encouraged to make such service delivery adjustments. Given the inseparability of service production and its consumption, decisions about a service function have to be made as close as possible to the customer -- in this case, the student. The result of this service attribute is a focus on process and a more decentralized operating system that relies on individual employee empowerment and judgement.

Another implication for service design in higher education involves resource allocation. Those service units with more frequent contact and/or service importance to the students should receive, at least in relative terms, more resources. This results in an allocation of resources based on service areas that are more important to the student, and that hopefully reflect the institution's commitment and values to its served market. The end result for the institution is a resource allocation scheme that allocates funds on the basis of customer priority, quite the same as done in the business world to achieve and maintain continued customer satisfaction with the market offerings of the firm.

While there are other service design implications, one more deserves special mention. The college or university must convey to its personnel -- faculty, staff, and administrators alike -- that the satisfaction of students with support services is an institutional priority. The institution's commitment to student satisfaction requires an internal marketing program (education and development activities) that has sufficient time to gain results. Such an institutional commitment to student satisfaction requires the president's leadership and support, or it will be seen as a public relations gimmick without substance both internally and externally. It must be clear that "student satisfaction" means delivering promised (and thus expected) services in a professional manner. It does not mean accommodating every whim or plea from students, who may require education during the service delivery process itself about what constitutes realistic expectations. The institutional commitment to student satisfaction does mean that everyone understands the service promise and what that requires on the part of individuals to deliver high quality.

The service design implications of accurate representation of service support units; the focus on process rather than structure; a different resource allocation logic; and a strong internal marketing program should help administrators in higher education define service quality and support its measurement in their respective institutions. When support services are audited for enhancement or realignment, the availability of student data on delivered service quality becomes one additional tool for decision-making. Thus, it is important that the consequences of measuring service quality in this market-driven framework are likewise understood by administrators in higher education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY

The assessment of the service quality of any one unit on campus cannot be considered in isolation from other units and from its impact on the global measure of service quality. Understanding the service quality rating of the institution as a whole or of any separate unit requires a large base of information and the willingness to change the realignment of institutional practices and resources. While it is unlikely that all service units need an in-depth evaluation every year, institutions could design an assessment of service quality that samples students and units for baseline data of the path model of influence on global ratings.

The measures constructed for the path analysis should be based upon the student's expectations of service quality rather than on historic goals or operating policies of the unit. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) provide the basis for the design of an instrument to measure service quality. .Their research found ten determinants of service quality: access, communication, competence, courtesy, credibility, reliability, responsiveness, security, tangibles, and understanding or knowing the customer. Their ten dimensions were subsequently developed, through scale purification, into a five point scale of: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1988). The authors of this paper prefer the original ten, more discrete, dimensions and recommend that initial assessment research use these determinants of service quality. In either case, questions based on the ten or five determinants need to be developed for support service units on campus such as the following examples:

1. Does the catalog reflect the courses offered or required in a major? (tangibles)

2. Is student insurance coverage accepted at the health center as indicated in orientation commentary? (reliability)

3. Was the student recreation center open during the publicized hours of operation? (access)

4. Was a dormitory room assignment made in response to your medical concern? (assurance or empathy)

These questions only serve as preliminary tentative examples of how the determinant of service quality can be incorporated into assessment questions of importance to the student customer.

Use of the aforementioned determinants of service quality as the basis for measuring quality in various service units enables a range of analyses to be conducted. First, the total quality score for each unit is based on the same criteria, thus providing comparability across service units. However, when units construct questions without an institutional framework of service commitment, little meaningful analysis can be done across units. In this case, unit variations are likely to be a function of unit supervision and employee characteristics or structural components rather than institutional decisions.

Second, the parsimonious nature of the guiding service quality criteria allows the assessment of many units during baseline collection and provides sufficient data for a path model. Units on campus which show a disproportionate negative impact on the global measure or which show nonstandard relationships among the determinants of quality can be studied with more precision by focus groups or observational studies. Focus group information can provide in-depth qualitative research information about aspects of service quality which are different from student expectations. Those expectations can be more fully explored in focus groups that provide insight into

service delivery unavailable from written questionnaires. The managerial challenge is to minimize the gap between students' expectations and their actual institutional experience.

Third, analyzing across the determinants of service quality allows each institution to review its values as reflected in delivered service quality. Questions such as the institutional commitment to "responsiveness" can be addressed by aggregating data across all units. Such analysis should take into account dimensions of the service such as high versus low involvement by the student. In high involvement services, the process is more important than in low involvement services, so the most service sensitive employees need to be placed in services that have high student involvement characteristics.

CONCLUSION

This proposed path assessment of service quality in higher education support services is dependent upon student perceptions rather than the structure of the institution. Consequently, student perceptions of service quality from support units may alter the institutional structure, although the reverse is less likely.

The use of previously researched service quality attributes in higher education parallels the new perspective in outcomes assessment. Now students are being asked whether they have learned something -- and thus we indirectly seek knowledge about the content presented. Our proposed assessment of service quality in nonacademic support units builds on student knowledge also, particularly when the delivered service quality impacts the quality assessment of the core market offering, i.e., courses, majors, and degrees. Since the global measurement of quality is dependent upon the service quality delivered throughout the institution, the measurement of such service quality is important and warranted.

FIGURE 1

Marketing and Environmental Factors

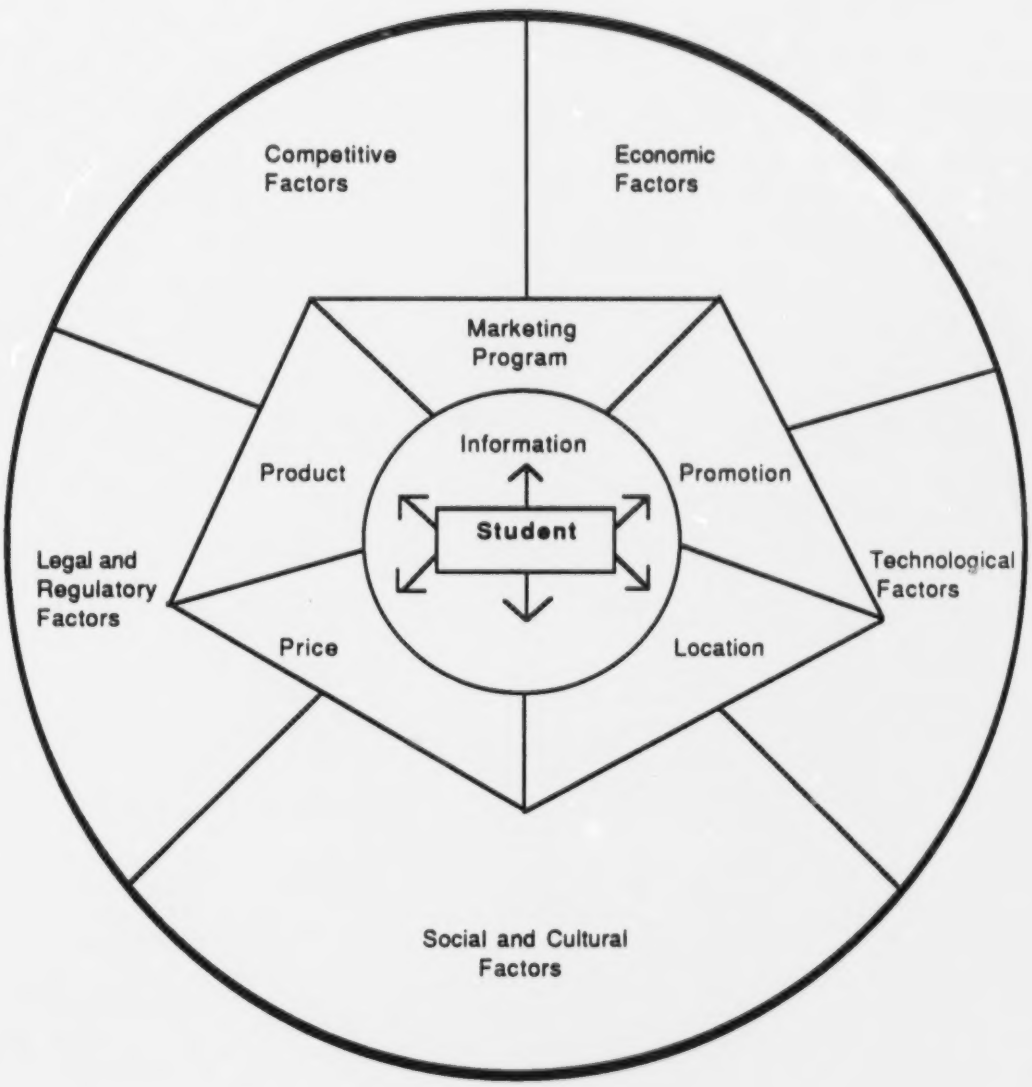
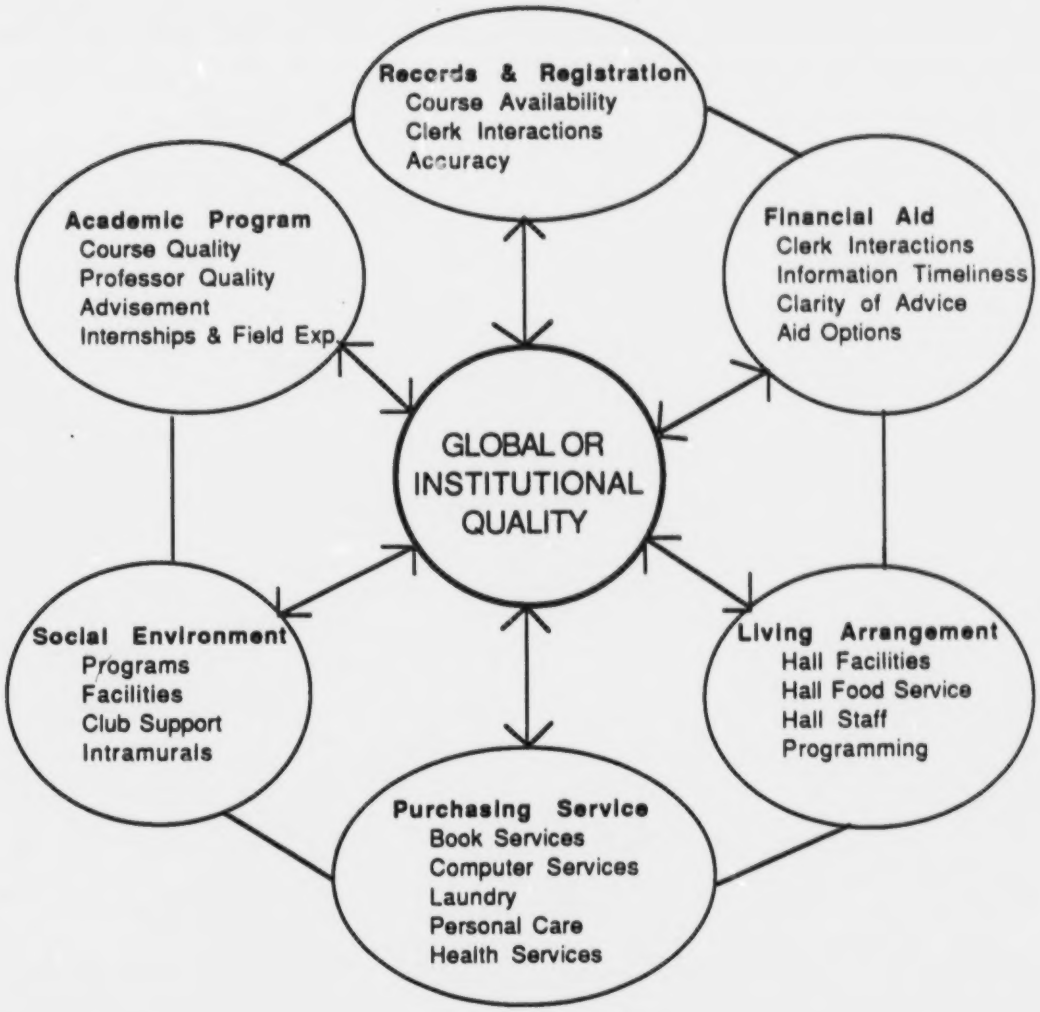


FIGURE 2

Blueprint of Service Quality Influences



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